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LETTERS

ONLY FOUR COPIES of the first (or proof) state of the Martin Drøeshout 'portrait' survive, affording a less contrived view of the possible origin of this enigmatic representation than the more familiar version generally circulated [E.K. Chambers, *William Shakespeare: A Study of Facts & Problems*, (1930) Oxford University Press, v 11 plate xxvi; the artist described "of the third generation of a family of Flemish artists resident in London" v 11 p240]. Chambers details the 'improvements' in the second or common state: "The eyebrows and moustache have been intensified. The chin is stubbly, instead of smooth. Light has been added at the edge of the hair and a shadow on the collar." [v 11 p241] The doublet was not modified.

The first state was used by M. H. Spielmann [author of *Shakespeare's Portraiture*, 1923] to dismiss claims that the original of the Drøeshout plate might be the Flower portrait in the Stratford Memorial, which "agrees with the ordinary [or second] impressions, where these deviate from the first state." [*op cit*, v 11 p241]

Recognition that the Drøeshout plate was copied from an earlier portrait (or portraits) issues from the incongruity, as John Thomas Looney pointed out, that Martin Drøeshout (born 1601) "was only a lad of fifteen when Shakspeare died; he would be only twelve when Shakspeare was in London probably for the last time." [J. Thomas Looney, "*Shakespeare*" Identified in *Edward de Vere the Seventeenth Earl of Oxford*, (1920) Cecil Palmer, London, p533] Features in the plate, moreover, suggest the likelihood of additional sources: "the presentiment is an ungainly one. The head is too large for the body. The line of the jaw is hard. There is bad drawing in the hair, eyes, nose, ear, and mouth, which is too much to the right. The lines of the dress are distorted. The lighting comes from more than one direction." [Chambers, *op cit*, v 11 p241]

It has since been conjectured that the subject bears two right eyes & two left arms (not unlike a face-card or court-card: eg, Jack or King), while the thick line of the left jaw leaves the impression of a mask.

According to the Dictionary of National Biography, Martin son of Michael Drœshout was baptized 26 April 1601 – 37 years to the day after William Shaksper of Stratford-upon-Avon. His father (son of John Drœshout, a painter who likely emigrated from the Low Countries in the late '60s or early '70s) returned to London in 1590 after an indenture as copper engraver in Brussels, marrying Susanna van der Ersbek (originally from Ghent) 17 August 1595. His elder brother John (baptized 16 May 1596 – precisely nine months after the wedding) was likewise in the employ of booksellers, producing engraved portraits of John Babington (in *Pyrotechnia, or a Discourse of Artificiall Fireworks*, 1635; cf. Anthony Babington executed with thirteen others 20/1 September 1586 for their complicity in the so-called Babington Plot); John Danes; Richard Elton (1650); Jeffrey Hudson (the Duke of Buckingham's dwarf; in *The Newe Year's Gift*, 1636); Arthur Johnston (1587–1641; royal physician & Latin versifier whose second wife was a native of Brabant) *et al*, among other frontispieces & broadsides.

John's will (1652), which identifies him as 'of St Bride's, Fleet Street, London, Ingraver', makes mention of a nephew also named Martin Drœshout. In addition, their father Michael seems to have had a brother named Martin "twice married at the Dutch Church [at Austin Friars, near Bishopsgate], viz on 16 Oct 1602 to Anna Winterbeke of Brussels, and 30 Oct 1604 to Janneker Molyns of Antwerp. He was granted denization [in England] on 20 Jan 1608, being described as 'Martin Drœshout, painter, of Brabant.'" [DNB V VI, p19]

Among other engravings of the Martin Drœshout credited with the portrait of Shakespeare, are a full-length likeness of George Villiers Duke of Buckingham (1592–1628; of whom two paintings survive by Cornelius Janssen) & representations of Mountjoy Blount Earl of Newport (1597–1666; natural son of Charles Blount Earl of Devonshire & Penelope Lady Rich, sister of Robert Devereux Earl of Essex, & Philip Sidney's immortal Stella); Dr Helkiah Crooke (1576–1635; physician to James I; in *Mikrokosmographia, a Description of the Body of Man*, 1631, second edition – originally 1616); Dr John Donne (1573–1631); General William Fairfax (*d.* 1644); John Foxe (1516–87); James Marquis of Hamilton (1589–1625; the engraving dated 1623; his residence in London being Fisher's Folly just outside Bishopsgate, the home Edward de Vere kept for his company of playwrights known as the University Wits, 1584–8; his closest friend

George Eglishan ultimately accusing Buckingham of having poisoned Hamilton); Sir Thomas Overbury (1581–1613; poet & erstwhile friend of Ben Jonson; tutor to Robert Carr Earl of Somerset, whose intended, Frances Howard divorced Countess of Essex, had him horribly poisoned; the engraving however is not recorded in DNB V XIV, pp1271–6) *et al*.

The Drœshout family from its introduction to London may well have been further under the patronage of a faction of the nobility, who seem to have accommodated Flemish artists readily. St Bride's Fleet St was the parish (adjacent to Blackfriars Theatre beyond the wall, close by the stationers' stalls in St Paul's Churchyard) nearest the original Boar's Head Tavern, en route to the Savoy & Cecil House.

Michael Drœshout produced "a curious allegorical engraving of the 'Gunpowder Plot' [5 November 1605]" [DNB V VI, p19], a subject so sensitive that Ben Jonson (Robert Cecil's special Privy Council informant into Catholic intrigues immediately following the Plot's discovery, who noisily recanted his own Catholicism five years later when a Catholic rebel assassinated Henri IV reviving fears of Papist plots) was forced to tactfully excuse himself from England for almost two years following the sole performance of *Catiline*, his play about the Plot (1611).

Looney early identified a likely source for the Folio plate: "Certain features in the picture immediately suggested the Drœshout engraving; most particularly the thin dark line which runs along above the upper lip, leaving a slight space between this suggestion of a moustache and the edge of the lip itself. Since then we have looked over a large number of portraits of the time, and have discovered nothing else similar. In addition there were the same facial proportions, the same arching of the eyebrows, the identical pose (three-quarter face), the same direction of gaze, about an equal amount of bust, the chief difference being that one is turned right and the other to the left: altogether there was quite sufficient to suggest that, when the two could be brought together, a very strong case might be made out for Drœshout having worked from this portrait of Edward de Vere, making modifications according to instructions. For Oxford was only twenty-five when the portrait was painted, and, of course, it was necessary to represent Shakespeare as an older man." [*op cit*, pp533/4] The subtler eyebrows & thinner moustache of the first state of the Drœshout plate are more readily identified

with those of the copy of the Lewyn portrait of Edward de Vere preserved at Welbeck Abbey (now in the possession of Ruth Loyd Miller), referred to by Looney.

Looney went on to speculate that another portrait (the Grafton) used as a subsidiary source for the plate, had its date altered "so that the engraver need not be in the secret" [*op cit*, p535], affording a reasonable explanation for alterations uncovered subsequently in other putative portraits of William Shakespeare. Rather than disfigure existing portraits of an honoured forbear, however, would it not seem more judicious to have a copy made of one of the paintings, incorporating the desired alterations, for the engraver to work from, if that were the need.

In the case of the Janssen original, it would further strain credulity to paint out features identifying the subject as an aristocrat only to call in a kinsman from a companion guild to engrave the likeness. Cornelius Janssen (who also signed himself Jonson), baptized at the Dutch Church in Austin Friars, 14 October 1593, lived in Blackfriars four blocks from St Bride's. His fame as one of the pre-eminent "depicter[s] of the court nobility and gentry in England" [DNB v x, p686] from 1618 until the time of the Civil War, cannot have escaped Drœshout who one might expect would pride himself on being able to recognize the artist from the work (particularly celebrated masters such as Janssen or Mytens).

The Janssen name further echoes through the passages of the labyrinthine Shakespeare edifice in the complicity of master stonemasons Bernard & his brother Gerært (*aka* Gerard Jonson). Their father Gerært Janssen, tombmaker, emigrated from Amsterdam about 1567. The brothers, who resided in the 1620s "in the parish of St Thomas the Apostle, Southwark, near the Globe Theatre", are memorialized in Bernard's case for the erection of Northampton House at Charing Cross (for Henry Howard Earl of Northampton, second son of Henry Howard Earl of Surrey, thus Edward de Vere's first cousin); Audley End (for Thomas Howard Earl of Suffolk, second son of Edward de Vere's first cousin Thomas Howard Duke of Norfolk, first son of Henry Howard Earl of Surrey); & the tombs of Thomas Sutton at Charterhouse; & Sir Nicholas Bacon (father of Francis) in Suffolk; and in Gerard's case for "the portrait bust of Shakespeare in the church at Stratford-on-Avon". Bernard also "designed the triumphal arch erected by the members of the Dutch

Church, Austin Friars,¹ on the accession of Charles I." [DNB v x, p685]

Chambers concedes that the doublet depicted in the Drœshout plate "is the rich costume of a well-placed man" & goes on to add "I do not think it need be inferred that Shakespeare would only have worn it on the stage, or that it is the livery of a groom of the chamber." [*op cit*, v 11 p241] Apparently intended to support the contention that a commoner of the playwright's caliber may have earned the licence to adopt such a costume, this speculation lends itself inadvertently (though I presume, unwittingly) to theories of aristocratic authorship. And of course the doublet bears a remarkable resemblance to that in the Janssen painting of 'Shakespeare'.

If the amalgam of the Drœshout image were intended to preserve identifiable elements from several original portraits of Edward de Vere (including the Lewyn, Ketel & Janssen) to secure ultimate proof of Shakespeare's true identity, one might expect these disparate elements to stand out from the composition. In the case of the buttons, both the design & direction of their orientation fairly beg identification with those in the Lewyn portrait of de Vere – the Drœshout doublet facing right while the buttons (as in the Lewyn) face left.

A close row of small buttons was the hallmark of the Elizabethan gentleman, & while most such buttons appear to have a raised nub at their centre, very few conform to the enveloping design so vividly depicted in the Lewyn painting. In fact, in ten years of searching I have yet to encounter any that approach this design quite like those so painstakingly engraved by Drœshout. It should be understood that the curved line presents far greater difficulty for the engraver than either the painter or draftsman.

Contrary to what the costume experts might contend, buttons like other aspects of aristocratic dress were not categorically ordered from stock, particularly for the purpose of a portrait. The noble

¹ the Dutch Church in the old Austin Friary near Bishopsgate where Cornelius Janssen was baptized 14 October 1593; Martin Drœshout's uncle Martin Drœshout was married 16 October 1602 & again 30 October 1604; & the congregation erected a triumphal arch designed by Bernard Janssen for the coronation of Charles I (Gerard Janssen, his brother, having only recently executed the portrait bust of Shakespeare in the church in Stratford-on-Avon)

portrait presented an allegorical memento of the distinguished subject with every aspect from the colour of the doublet & hose down to the pattern in the buttons, contrived to convey significance for posterity: viz, the black-and-white or black-and-gold co-ordination of the Hilliard miniature for instance ['Man Clasping a Hand from a Cloud' 1588: *Elizabethan Miniatures*, (1943) Penguin, plate iv b], exhaustively identified by Leslie Hotson as an impresa distinguishing Mercury/Hermes, companion to Phoebus/Apollo the god of poetry. [*Shakespeare by Hilliard*, 1977: Chatto & Windus, London]

The potentially fatal implication of a carelessly conceived impresa may be dramatized by the execution of Oxford's uncle Henry Howard Earl of Surrey (1547) for a portrait perceived to challenge both the proprieties of heraldry & more dangerously the inviolability of the crown. Elizabethan portraiture abounds with dramatic variation in button design sufficient to qualify the presumption that dress buttons were merely generic. Just as Elizabeth sported rose-shaped buttons, so too did pre-eminent peers such as Edward de Vere commission personalized insignia.

The Lewyn portrait was painted in Paris, March 1575. The buttons appear to be made of gold. Twenty-five buttons are visible: the age of the subject. The ruff boasts seventeen points: the seventeenth Earl of Oxford. Of course these are merely coincidences... (the original motto on the surviving copy, it will be recalled, does *not* identify the subject).

Following his return from sixteen months abroad (7 January 1575 through 20 April 1576), Edward de Vere became immediately notorious as the Italianate gentleman. B. M. Ward quotes Stow in establishing Oxford's return from Italy as the start of a new fashion in London: "Milliners or Haberdashers had not any gloves embroidered, or trimmed with gold or silk, neither gold nor embroidered girdles and hangers,² neither could they make any costly wash or perfume; until...[he] came from Italy, and brought with him gloves, sweet bags, a perfumed leather jerkin, and other pleasant things; and that year the Queen had a pair of perfumed gloves trimmed only with four tufts, or roses of coloured silk." [*The Seventeenth Earl of Oxford 1550-1604 from Contemporary Documents*, (1928) John Murray, London, p129]

2 note the emphasis on gold & embroidery, both echoed in the portrait

Curious in light of this signal moment in the history of English fashion, that Drœshout should be directed to replicate the buttons from the portrait painted so long before, during this seminal trip. An image fused in the fabric of the national memory unfaded (viz, Stow's *Annals*), preserving a paradigmatic reminder of the Italianate Earl's unique significance to British culture. The earliest impression, moreover, upon which this renaissance in style could have been modelled or recollected.

The thing to consider is not merely the shape of the buttons in the Drœshout plate but also the inexplicable incongruity of their orientation. Every Shakespearean scholar agrees that the plate was copied from some original & here we encounter a painting done almost 50 years before with precisely the same shape & orientation of buttons. The speculation that the doublet in the plate may have been drawn from that in the Janssen portrait apparently presents less difficulty for its supporters despite considerable differences in the details.

Remember Drœshout wasn't copying a generic style of dress he was copying a picture. And given the stylized blur of small button design in most contemporary paintings, it remains focal that the Drœshout buttons pointedly incline toward an original with every detail evidently clearly visible. If it hadn't already been established that portraits of Oxford appear to have been a likely source, I might be more inclined to temper the speculation, but everything fits too well.

If, as Oxfordians contend, there were a number of later paintings of Edward de Vere available from which to grave a likeness, why condescend to incorporate features from his earliest portrait? The presence of those buttons preserves an identifiable significance in their replication of the detail from the Lewyn portrait, which unavoidably draws attention to the subject's dress & thereby a focus on fashion. Beneath his cloak Edward de Vere would be remembered not only for his genius for clothing the mind.

THE DETAILS of Ben's early life are vague. Born "it is said, in Westminster, in 1572/3. He was, according to his own account, grandson of 'a gentleman' who had come from Carlisle, 'and he thought from Annandale to it,' and had taken service under Henry VIII. Benjamin's father, however, lost his estate under Mary, subsequently became a 'minister,' and died a month before the birth of the dramatist.... His mother, whose ancestry is unknown, was a woman of vigorous character, with much of the proud self-consciousness which marked her son. Her second husband, whom she married while Benjamin was still a child, was a 'master-bricklayer' living in Hartshorn Lane, near Charing Cross." [DNB V X, p1069]

She married a Jonson in the 70s who was a master bricklayer. Gerært Janssen (*aka* Gerard Jonson), tombmaker, emigrated from Amsterdam about 1567. His sons were master stone-masons known to have been employed by the Howards & Bacons, & to have executed "the portrait bust of Shakespeare in the church at Stratford-on-Avon".¹ Ben Jonson calls Shakespeare "Sweet Swan of Auon" in his commendatory verse in the Folio.

'Poorly brought up' Ben was "first sent to a school held in the church of St Martin's-in-the-Fields, but was soon removed to Westminster School at the expense of William Camden, then second master, to whom he owed his future eminence in learning." [*op cit*, p1069]

Here he became "close companions" with Robert Cotton, John Davies (who described Shakespeare "our English Terence" in his *Scourge of Folly*, 1610) & Hugh Holland (whose verse headed "Vpon the Lines and Life of the Famous Scenicke Poet, Master William

¹ the portrait bust of Shakespeare in the church of Stratford-on-Avon bears an uncanny resemblance to Sir Nicholas Bacon as painted by Zuccherò (Sir Edwin Durning-Lawrence, *Bacon Is Shakespeare*, 1910: John McBride, New York, plates v/v1). Recall, the sculptor's brother, Bernard Janssen, erected the tomb of Sir Nicholas Bacon in Suffolk.

Shakespeare" appears on the conjugate leaf to Jonson's dedication "to the Most Noble and Incomparable Paire of Brethren William Earle of Pembroke, &c... and Philip Earl of Montgomery, &c..." in the Folio).

Camden, a beneficiary of Burghley's patronage, helped establish the Society of Antiquaries in 1572 whose original members included William Dethick² (later Garter King-of-Arms, accused in 1602 by Peter Brooke York Herald, of elevating base persons – citing among 23 petitions, that of John Shakespeare, William's dad), William Lambarde, Thomas Milles, Thomas Riddell, Henry Spelman, John Stow & Francis Thynne.

First notice of Ben's involvement with the theatre appears in Henslowe's diary where he is identified as a player (22 July 1597) & playwright (3 December 1597) for the Admiral's Men. At 26 Ben killed Gabriel Spencer a fellow actor (22 September 1598) in what he later described a duel – in the Spittlefields just north of Fisher's Folly beyond Bishopsgate, across from the Curtain in Shoreditch. He was imprisoned at Newgate pleading "benefit of clergy" at his trial in October (a defence initially reserved for clergy but later extended to laymen "who had to read a Latin psalm correctly in order to be entitled to the exemption" which was claimable however only once, though never for high treason). "The whole transaction remains obscure...." [*op cit*, p1070]

Both his adoption by Camden & this exceptional intercession in a capital felony point inescapably to powerful friends or relations. "Among the cultivated aristocracy Jonson had a large number of friends with whom, as his 'Epigrams' and 'Forest' show, he lived on terms of frank intimacy. Conspicuous among these were the Sidneys and their kindred and connections; Sir Robert Sidney of Penshurst, where Jonson was a frequent guest...; Sir William Sidney (Sir Philip Sidney's nephew)...; Lady Mary Wroth, his niece...; the Countess of Rutland, Sidney's daughter...; [&] the Earl of Pembroke who presented him annually with 20 pounds to buy books with...." [*op cit*, p1074]

His cynical parodies of Shakespeare however leave the impression of one harbouring a grudge. And the clue may be festering in

² William Dethick was defended by William Camden in this dispute; ie, the controversy over the Shakespeare arms involved Ben Jonson's first patron & master – whose own patron was Lord Burghley.

Bernard Jonson's commissions for the erection of Northampton House at Charing Cross (for Henry Howard Earl of Northampton, second son of Henry Howard Earl of Surrey); & Audley End (for Thomas Howard Earl of Suffolk, second son of Thomas Howard Duke of Norfolk, first son of Henry Howard Earl of Surrey).

Thomas Howard Third Duke of Norfolk & first cousin to Edward de Vere was committed to the Tower 5 September 1571 for his complicity in the so-called Ridolfi Plot, tried for high treason 16 January 1572 & executed 2 June 1572. Consider the possibility that Ben Jonson (born "1572/3 in Westminster") may in fact have been fathered by a nobleman at court. A father who died a month before his birth.

TWENTY-ODD COPIES

29 NOVEMBER 2002

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